

2007 Nevada Library Leadership Institute

Facilitating to Lead!

August 20 to 24, 2007

Sahara West Library, Las Vegas

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"Facilitating"? What is "Facilitating"?! Curiosity got the better of me, so I signed up for the Nevada Library Leadership Institute at the Sahara West Library in Las Vegas, August 20-24, 2007. Curiosity got the better of thirty librarians from around Nevada, who enjoyed four days together and learned about facilitation, as well as lots about Nevada Libraryland! What a great opportunity to meet peers from all sorts of libraries and learn about many issues, successes, and upcoming opportunities within our state. We participated in group activities throughout the week and became well acquainted by the end of the seminar.

So, what is facilitation? It's a way of providing leadership without taking the reins. A facilitator's job is to get others to assume responsibility and to take the lead. Facilitators make their contribution by:

- Helping the group define its overall goal
- Helping members assess needs and create plans
- Guiding group discussion to stay on track
- Making accurate notes large enough to be seen by the group
- Using consensus to help a group make decisions
- Supporting members in assessing their current skills
- Providing processes that help members use their time efficiently
- Helping the group understand its own processes to work effectively
- Providing feedback to the group
- Managing conflict using a collaborative approach
- Helping the group communicate effectively
- Fostering leadership in others by sharing group projects

Effective questioning is the key facilitative technique. As a facilitator, you can never ask too many questions. For example, if you want to stimulate everyone's thinking, direct questions to the group. If you want to allow people to respond voluntarily or avoid putting someone on the spot, ask a question such as "What experiences have any of you had with this problem?" We were taught to ask the right question at the right time, of the right person or group.

One of the toughest challenges of a facilitator is staying neutral. It was difficult at times to stay focused on the process of facilitating and to suppress one's own ideas and beliefs about the problem at hand. Some strategies to stay neutral are to ask questions, offer suggestions and to keep personal opinions to oneself. Most of us slipped once or twice, interjecting our personal beliefs into the discussions.

We quickly learned that the facilitator is one of the most important roles to emerge in today's workplace. Facilitation is now recognized as an essential skill for project managers, team leaders, committee chairs and members - not to mention managers who are trying to keep pace with ever-changing demands. Through much trial and error, we learned to develop facilitating skills practicing at our group tables. These practice runs proved the concept of facilitation, and we are anxious to get back to work and try out the concept!

Point in case was a study we "facilitated" about how to provide better service to non-English speaking library users. Within a short time the group of five at my table came up with these results:

Easy Effort/High Impact

- Spanish outreach
- Ask Acquisitions Librarians about Spanish vendors
- Inquire to current vendors about Spanish materials
- Put up Spanish and English signs

High Effort/High Impact

- Spanish language advertising
- Provide Spanish materials and videos (but not necessarily electronic databases)
- Subscribe to more Spanish language magazines
- Increase Spanish language materials budget
- Cultural programs

Easy Effort/Low Impact

- Computer literacy classes in Spanish

High Effort/Low Impact

- Spanish language training for staff
- Spanish orientations for patrons
- ESL classes in the library
- Offer practical programming in Spanish

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Many thanks to the great instructors: Ingrid Bens, M.Ed., Carla Sanda, CPF, and Ruth Urban, MS, CPF. These three lively women made the week a complete success, loading us with new information, new skills and a renewed enthusiasm for leadership.